An Ecology of Love (Part 1 - Introduction)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 51:00

I'd like to begin by asking you a couple of questions. I am well aware that these are not easy questions to answer, so it's perhaps a little unfair of me, perhaps a little naughty. But I'm asking them to probe into an aspect and dimension of our lives and also of our relationship with the world and with nature that often doesn't get probed into and opened up. Hopefully there's something in these questions, despite their difficulty, that can begin to probe and open up an inquiry and a conversation at a certain level and in certain directions.

So here are the questions. If, as I hope you do, you say or think or feel "I love the earth, I love nature"—if you say or feel or think that—what do you mean exactly? I love nature. I love the earth. You may not have articulated that, but if you feel that, what do you mean exactly? In other words, what is it that you love?

I don't mean give me a list of specific trees—"I love that big turkey oak at the front of Gaia House" or "I love this particular stretch of beach, this place, this whatever it is." I don't mean that. I mean, what is it about the earth or nature that you love? And what do you even mean when you say or feel or think "earth," "the earth," or "nature"?

I said these are not easy questions, kind of awkward and a little bit unfair. Very difficult to answer, very difficult to probe in that direction. What is it you love, and what do you mean, what do we mean when we say earth, nature? Just take a little time right now to see what comes for you with that, to probe a little. What do you mean?

It's not easy, these questions, but just see what comes up and how you would frame it, how you would articulate that for yourself. I'm actually extremely interested to hear everyone's answer, but obviously that's not possible, and for the sake of time I should have given you more time.

Let me add to those questions. Did beauty have something to do with your answer, with what you love? And if so, what exactly do you mean by beauty? Do you mean pretty sights, nice colors and arrangement of colors in a nice sunset or sunrise? Do you mean pleasant sounds, pleasant sweet melodies of birds, pleasant sense experiences? Is that what you mean by beauty?

Again, I'm not being very fair here, but I want to open something up through the questioning, so just bear with this. So is it pleasant sense experiences? Pretty sights, pretty sounds, and so on. Pretty touch of the breeze on the cheek or whatever. Nice fragrances of flowers.

Is it wonder? Is that part of what you know? Is there wonder at the biology of it all, the intricacy of the biology of nature, the diversity of that biology, the mechanisms of its evolution, the staggering complexity

of that? Is there wonder at all of that? Is that part of what you love? Part of even what we mean by earth and nature?

Wonder also perhaps at the dynamics of either self-regulating ecosystems or evolving ecosystems. So wonder at that intricacy and the dynamics of that. Do you love and do you mean by nature, and wonder at, the fact of the interconnectedness of all these biological processes? The fact of the interconnectedness of all these biological processes—is that part of it?

Is it a love of the support that you recognize that the earth's biological processes, the biological processes of nature provide for you, for us? The sustenance, the matrix—from mater, mother—Mother Earth, the matrix of support provided by the total intricate net of biological processes.

Does your answer to these difficult questions involve amazement and wonder? I imagine it does. It may do. There's no right and wrong here. Again, just probing.

And if it includes an appreciation of the support that the earth's biological processes provide, does it also include an acknowledgment of the danger and potential harms of that very totality of biological processes, the power of nature in very different ways to harm and cause danger for us and for other beings?

Is it all of these?

These little half-answers I've given. So whatever it is you articulated in response to those difficult questions—what do you love? What is earth? What is nature?—I wonder if now you can step back from your articulation, from whatever you formulated as an answer, and kind of hear it, hear your own answer, but not so much from inside it, almost as if you're hearing it afresh and just sort of appraising that answer, if that's possible, to the extent that that's possible.

Because what I really want to ask in all this is: if you can hear that statement, so to speak, more from the outside, not being wrapped up in it, is there something missing from whatever you articulated, from the statement that you articulated to yourself about your love and about what nature is? Is there something missing? Has your answer captured completely what it is you love and what the earth and nature is? Or is there something missing from what you articulated?

You know, love always, and in many ways, involves view. And by view I mean an idea of something, an intellectual idea, whether it's conscious or not, articulated or not, verbal or not, and also the perception, the view, the way of looking, the sense of something. Love always involves view of what we love. In other words, when I love, I'm looking at something in a certain way, and when I look at something in a certain way, it's part of my love and it affects my love.

Love always involves view. This is a big part of what I want to talk about today. Always and in many ways. And we can view things in many ways. Other views are possible, other ways of looking are possible. So these questions I ask you have to do with love and to do with view, which always go together in complex

ways, as I want to kind of elaborate on and expand.

But if I come back to this question, is there something missing from whatever you articulated in response to those kind of unfair questions about your love of the earth and love of nature? Was sacredness, a sense of sacredness, a part of what you articulated? The sacredness of the earth, the sacredness of nature. Was that a part of your articulation? Is that a part of what you love? Is that somehow an integral aspect of your love and of your sense of what nature is and what earth is?

Sacred is a difficult word these days, as I'm going to go into a little bit. But really, there are many, actually infinite possible kinds of experience of sacredness for us as human beings. Infinite. There's no end to the variety of the sense of sacredness, the perceptions of sacredness, the kinds of sacredness that we can feel and sense. So I certainly don't mean to prescribe any kind of particular sense of sacredness or idea of sacredness at all.

Sometimes the sense of sacredness is what would obviously be heard and appraised by someone else as sacred—perhaps nature as a face of the divine, an expression of the divine, something angelic, what's called a theophany, an appearance of the divine, a face of the divine, something as obvious as that. Maybe it really includes, for Dharma practice, a sense of the emptiness of nature. I'm going to come back to all this. Or maybe much less obvious than such sort of blatantly sacred kind of language.

So no prescription, but is sacredness a part of your love, a part of your sense and view of what earth and nature is? And then, if sacredness is part of it for you, do you voice it? Do you voice that sense of sacredness in your activism, in your engagement with environmental issues and engaged dharma? Do you voice it and how do you voice it? If you do, is the sacredness part of it, or is it there but it's somehow not something that comes out in your expression, in your voice? These are the kind of things I want to go into.

In modernist culture, if you like, the culture that we live in these days in the West, what I call the culture of modernism as the dominant view and way of understanding and thinking and feeling things—in modernist culture, this is dominated by what we could call secular humanism, or actually maybe more comprehensive, more accurate to say, it's increasingly dominated or characterized by a seeming abyss between secular humanism and narrow religious fundamentalism.

That's characteristic of modernist culture these days, and you need only read the news, the kind of debates that go on, or really don't go on, because there is an abyss there. Conversations are not being had across this kind of abyss between secular humanism and narrow religious fundamentalism, which sometimes have a lot more in common with each other as poles, polarities, than either end of that polarity would like to admit.

But in this culture, dominated by secular humanism, by this kind of abyss between secular humanism and narrow religious fundamentalism, there seems very little appeal in the discourse around climate change or environmental crises that we face, very little appeal in the discourse to a sense of nature and the

cosmos as sacred. It seems to me. And even from religious institutions and traditions or spiritual institutions and traditions, very little, very cautious or minor in relation to other points. They might make points about political equality and caring for the poor, all of which is hugely important. But this aspect of sacredness seems shrunk or exiled from the discourse, cut out.

Is it taboo? Are we afraid that it will be mocked, dismissed, regarded as irrelevant? Do we regard it as irrelevant? Have we lost over the centuries the vocabulary of holiness, of sacredness, and of invoking that? Have we even lost—not everyone obviously, but as a culture, what's pervasive in the culture—have we lost even the perspective and the sense of sacredness? Has it gone from our view, from our sense of the world?

Historically, of course, there came at some point following the Enlightenment, the Western Enlightenment, and the gradual, slow separation of church and state. This was a very good thing, taking away power from sometimes corrupt institutions. The separation of church and state—a very helpful development that occurred in Western history. But with it also, perhaps, came a separation of not just the institutions of church and state, but a separation of the sense of sacredness from economic, political, and public discourse.

That's a huge generalization, I know. And in some areas of the West, that's definitely not the case. But as a generalization, the sense of sacredness, if it was there at all, if it was left at all, if it didn't dwindle and wasn't eroded completely, became something private and personal, separate from the public discourse on economics, politics, and civil life.

Just recently, Jeb Bush—younger brother of George W. and son of elder George, both ex-presidents, and I think governor of Florida who tends to run for the Republican presidential nomination—said, "I don't get my economic policy from my bishop, cardinal, or pope." He said this in response to comments by the Pope about the obligations of Catholics and politicians regarding the environment and climate. But there's this separation. He is a Catholic, yet even for him, there's a dividing of economics and politics from whatever he might consider or sense as sacred in his life.

In this eroding and denigrating, this exiling or dismissing of the sense of the sacred that has happened over centuries in the West, a void has been created. Where there was sacredness, there is now an absence. And of course, things either rush in or get thrust into that void to try and fill it.

One of those things is love—particularly romantic love. The rise in Western consciousness of the primacy and importance and kind of hype around romantic love has become a secular god for us over the last 150 years or so. Humans must love in one way or another. We must love. But what I partly want to explore today is how our love is constrained, constricted.

We talk a lot about love—we're somewhat obsessed by it, especially romantic love or family love and loving your children. But is our love and our very notion of love and the possibilities of our love

constrained in different ways?

Even in relation to climate change, there is—starting in the last few years—this campaign asking people to express and share photos of what they love that is threatened by climate change and environmental degradation. There's something very lovely in that, because instead of just critiquing, instead of the rage and anger and negativity that can so much enter the discourse around climate change and environment, it's good to include and emphasize emotions, particularly the positive emotions of love.

But then you get people writing in saying, "I love chocolate." Chocolate is actually threatened by climate change because of what the cocoa plant needs to grow and the ecosystems it requires. "I love chocolate. I love chocolate. I love chocolate." What's happened here? I mean, I actually do like chocolate. But what's happened in this absence of the sacred, the hype of love, the movement of that into the discourse? There's still the absence, it seems to me, of the discourse of sacredness, of the view and sense of sacredness.

Even writers like George Monbiot, who I have huge appreciation for and whose work I very much enjoy, seem not to include that dimension—the sense of sacredness—in the discourse, in the conversation. I don't know if it's shyness, as I said, or a fear of judgment, or if it's just not there.

So partly what I want to do is open up this question of the sacred and the sense of the sacred, the perception and idea of the sacred. Is it possible to reintroduce it into the whole picture? And also, if it's already there for you...

What can be done to support the courage—and it does take courage—to invoke it and to voice it in one's activism, in what one expresses in the world to others in society about climate change and about the environmental crises that we face? To voice it as part of the whole way of seeing and sensing nature?

Because if our love—and that could be love for anything; we're talking about nature and earth now—if our love is constrained by our view, by certain ideas or conceptual frameworks or just the sense that we have of things, then that has consequences. It has all kinds of consequences. That constraining of love by view has consequences, will create absences or voids in our love and in our actions.

Particularly what I want to get into and explain as we go on is this: if love is constrained by view, then what I'm going to call the erotic element and the vertical element—I will explain these—will be missing from our love and our view. The erotic and the vertical dimensions will be missing from our love and from our sense of what we love, in this case earth, nature. And that has consequences. That will have consequences.

The novelist Jonathan Franzen, in a Guardian article I read earlier this year, wrote that climate change has achieved what none of the madnesses of the twentieth century could: the final defeat of human reason. He writes that "the great hope of the Western Enlightenment—the hope that human rationality would enable us to transcend our evolutionary limitations—has taken a beating from wars and genocides, but only now, on the problem of climate change, has it foundered altogether."

So we can hope to address environmental and climate change issues rationally and hope that we can be smart enough technologically to figure it out. But as he implies there, the limits of human rationality apply to something like this when it's applied alone. Do we not need to perceive and feel differently? Not just to think differently and figure something clever out in terms of solutions—of course that's important—but do we not need to perceive and feel differently? Perceive the world, earth, nature, self and others. Perceive and feel them differently, all of that.

Is there not a need for us to re-enchant the cosmos? The cosmos that has become, over the centuries, lost its enchantment for us. It's become dis-enchanted. We live in a flat cosmos, as I'll go into in more detail as we go on. Is there not a problem with our worldview, our Weltanschauung, our seeing of the world?

So in this talk, as I said, I want to talk about the interaction of love and view and how view might limit or open love and also vice versa. The interaction of love and view and what that does, either by limiting or opening.

The political aspects or dimensions of the conversation around climate and environment, the economic, the scientific aspect—of course, obviously important, crucially important. But really, in this talk, I want to address another level of the whole thing, come at things from another angle. What I see as an important piece of the whole, a necessary piece of the whole conversation, the whole opening up that needs to happen.

Because climate change and environmental crisis—they're not just crises of technology, crises of politics or capitalism or economic systems. Climate change and the environmental crises, multiple environmental crises we face, are crises of values. Crises of values.

And values are rooted in what? Where do we get values from? We have a crisis in our values. And values are rooted in what? Well, actually, that's a complex question, but part of what values are rooted in are views, beliefs, perceptions, sensibilities. Of course, values influence these things, so again, it's mutually feeding. And there may be, too, something about heart capacities and just what we're capable of letting ourselves value, for fear of the stretching of the heart that's involved there and the depth of grief and emotion that are involved.

But for now, what I really want to emphasize is the rooting of values, the conditioning of values by views, beliefs, perceptions, sensibilities.

Before I get into all this, just to say something or stress something about—to put this talk in a context and say a couple of things about that. Firstly, my agenda, if you like, or my intention for the talk is hopefully to open up a range of possibilities generally and in all directions. To sort of hopefully plant seeds, maybe just scatter seeds in terms of views, ideas, communications, the inflow and the outflow of activism, what flows into our activism and our engagement with these issues and what flows out of that. That's my agenda, is really to open that up more and more generally and in all directions.

So I'm interested in the plurality of ways of doing that. I'm not interested in just saying this is the one thing that's important at all. I'm very interested in different approaches, different directions and different tones too and different styles of communication. There is a place, I think, for criticism and stridency, even rage. There's a place for cool analysis and poetry and all of that. But within all that—so that's my agenda, opening that up in multiple directions, and this talk is part of that—but you have to find, as a listener, you have to find what you personally resonate with, and that's up to you. That's the scattering seeds—they grow where they will, and that's completely fine.

So that's what's important, is that you resonate with what resonates for you personally. Now you will hear that I have a leaning and a personal preference in all this, and particularly in what I'm talking about today. But that's not my agenda. I don't want to thrust that on anyone, and certainly not in any particular form. I could not—it would be futile of me to pretend that I don't have a leaning and a personal preference and to try and keep that out from the way I express things and what comes into the talk.

I can't help... I lean towards the mystical. I lean towards the sacred. I lean towards a sense of radical emptiness and what that opens up in the possibility of perception—the sacredness and the mystical sense of things that this brings. So that's my personal preference and leaning. I'm just freely admitting that. But it's different than my agenda. Hopefully, if you do hear that leaning and my personal preference, you won't confuse that with my agenda, which is actually just this opening up.

Because there's a second question or statement to the context here of a talk like this: What do you need in regard to your activism and your engagement? What does your heart and soul need?

It's interesting, knowing activists. Some long-term activists can get kind of hardened, embittered through the course of years of activism. Maybe what's needed is for them to reconnect with the heart—with their heart, with the love that was the origin of their activism. Some of them actually need not to reconnect, but to connect in the first place. They never... Somehow the heart was not something that was opened enough or received enough attention or healing in the first place. So that might be a need in the whole conversation around activism and engagement—what you need.

Some activists need what we could call emotional skills or the skills of working with, navigating the heart's responses to the tragedies that we face and the disasters that are unfolding—the pain and suffering of all that. The emotional skills, the meditative tools to work well with what that does in the heart and the heart's responses to all that. This includes learning skillful responses, how to address burnout in activism. That's part of it—both addressing it in the heart and mind and body, and also just practically in how one is approaching activism.

Some activists need courage. They need encouragement to communicate what they love, or they need to learn the skills to communicate love, so that the love they feel can pour through their communication, their activism.

There are many, many aspects of activism and places where we are at different times in terms of what we actually need. So again, this talk just fits into one... It's one piece in a much bigger pie, if you like. One slice of a pie, one level, as I said—one tack, one approach.

What I want to do is open up and explore our perception, our view, our sense of Earth, nature—and particularly nature, of the sacredness of that, or the possible view, sense, perception of the sacredness of earth and nature. And also open up and explore our ideas, views, perceptions, senses of what love is.

So what is involved in love? That word "involve"—related to "revolve" and "revolution" from Latin. Like what turns in the field of love? What are the elements that mix together and turn together and fertilize and interact within love? Within love, so to speak, that either grows that love or takes it in different directions or opens it in a certain way or colors it or limits it? What is involved in love?

That's part of the original difficult questions I asked you: What is it about nature that you love, and what do you mean by nature?

So exploring in this talk love of nature as a basis for our activism. We're talking about an ecology of love—love of nature as a basis for action and also as a basis for ecology, for understanding or our idea of what nature is. That the love of nature becomes part of the idea, must influence the idea of what nature is. So love of nature is a basis for activism and ecology, and also this exploring love and how it works. In other words, the psychological and spiritual ecology of love—the study of the dynamics of love, the inner and outer dynamics of love, mostly the inner today. Actually, both.

So in the title, "An Ecology of Love," you can hear there's a double meaning. Just to confess, I seem to like putting double or even triple meanings in titles to try and get the most meaning and most expression out of limited time, limited words.

Let's go into this.

This poor word "love"—four-letter word—has become so stretched and has been made to try and do so much work in so many different directions and dimensions, and more and more so in recent centuries. But let's just start with a statement and say love, the word "love," is undefinable. I mean, ultimately, it's undefinable. And admit that.

But nevertheless, although it's undefinable, we could just shrug and walk away from exploring it. It's still explorable, and there are still aspects or dynamics and dimensions of love, or ways of thinking about it and breaking it up that can still be very fruitful in our lives and our expressions—fruitful for the psyche, for the soul, for our being. So we can say many, many things despite the undefinability of love.

But right now, let's say a few things. Firstly, and especially for this talk, what I want to emphasize is when we say love, I want to include two aspects or currents or kinds of love.

One is metta. So many of you will know this Pali word, M-E-T-T-A. It's usually translated as

loving-kindness. And...

Both metta and eros always involve a view—by which I mean an idea and sense, both conscious and unconscious, verbal and non-verbal, articulated or not—they always involve the view of both self and other. This view is intrinsic to metta and to eros, intrinsic to love, as I was saying earlier.

Now, one of the things that's absolutely crucial and vital to understand about views is that they're not fixed. They change. Our views change, and hopefully they do.

And more than that—they're fabricated. Views are fabricated. They're constructed. This doesn't mean they're false or that we should dismiss them. What it means is that they're malleable, they're workable. We can work with our views. We have some agency, some choice in our views of self and other.

This is enormously important to understand because it means that love—both metta and eros—can be cultivated, can be developed, can be refined. We're not stuck with whatever limited or constricted views we might have inherited or fallen into. We can expand them, deepen them, make them more beautiful.

The views we hold of ourselves and others directly shape the quality and possibility of our love. If I hold a very narrow, constricted view of who you are—seeing you only through the lens of your usefulness to me, or your appearance, or some single characteristic—then my love for you will be correspondingly narrow. But if I can expand my view, if I can see more of who you are in your fullness, in your mystery, in your infinite depths, then my love can expand accordingly.

This is true for metta and for eros both, though in different ways. With metta, as the view expands, the well-wishing can become more genuine, more heartfelt, less conditional. With eros, as the view expands, the desire to connect can become richer, more soulful, reaching toward ever greater intimacy with the full being of the other.

Our views can change. We need only look around and see how culturally views transform. Of course we can fix views, but looking around culturally, what I mean to say is views don't have to be fixed. They tend, at times, to get fixed, and they tend also to change. But culturally, if we look around us, views change. It's obvious—from culture to culture, from one society's period to another period in the same society.

So in relation to nature, the view of nature, the view of Earth, has changed, just culturally. This is from Adam Karn, also from a Guardian article. Over the course of millennia, he writes, "the way that people have imagined and perceived the natural world has changed repeatedly and often dramatically. The concept of 'nature' is subjective, dynamic, and culturally constrained"—because it's culturally conditioned, you could say.

The classic example is smallholder agriculture. What was once, many thousands of years ago, considered the height of mastery over nature is now an archetypal image of humans living in harmony with their environment. The view of nature changes culturally. It changes. Just to put a tag here on words in what he

wrote—noticing "imagined" and "perceived," because that's a lot of what I want to go into. The imagination is part of perception, and also the use of the word "archetypal." I'm going to come back to these things.

So views are not necessarily fixed. They change through and in the culture. They have changed. Views of nature have changed many times, and they will again. They will again, culturally.

So they change culturally, but also as a Dharma practitioner, it's really important to recognize how views are dependent basically on facets of the citta, facets of the mind and the heart—dependent on the mind state, dependent on practicing different ways of looking, actually practicing a different view. And the sense that I have of something, whether it's the world, nature, the cosmos, the self, the other—that sense changes dependent on facets of the citta, dependent on different ways of looking. And that's something we can practice.

So in other words, the things that we perceive, including nature, including earth, are empty of any real independent way that they are. When you really go into this question of view, you realize it's not that things are a particular way, nature is a particular way. It's that all we have is views, and those views are dependent arisings. We can view in different ways, as I said before.

So all things, including nature, including earth, are empty—empty of any kind of real independent way they are, independent of the way that we look at them. And therefore, because they're empty, they can be viewed in different ways. And that's one way of understanding what practice is. It's not a very common way of understanding what meditative practice is and what the path is, but it's, I think, a very fruitful way of looking. Meditation, practice, the journey of awakening—it's practicing skill in different views and seeing what that does.

As we just said, the view of anything, in this case of nature or earth, view is a dependent arising—dependent on what's dominant in the culture, what we absorb from the culture, dependent also on the so-called inner mindset and factors of the mind and the heart and the way of looking. So view arises dependently and also is itself part of dependent origination. It conditions other things. Other things are dependent on view. In other words, it brings consequences. Any view that we have has certain consequences, and one of the consequences I mentioned before is its consequences on love. Views will affect love. They will cause love to deepen or grow in certain ways, or they will limit it, constrict it in certain ways.

So love and view have this mutual reciprocity, mutual informing, mutual influencing, mutual dependency—mutual dependency of love and view. Really, I hope you can hear that this is not abstract. I hope that as we go on in the talk, you can really understand how totally crucial this is and how totally I'm talking about experience and I'm talking about our life and what comes out of our life and how we sense our life.

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